

Yoshitomo Saito: millionyearseeds

I. Trial by Fire

Early in his childhood, Yoshitomo Saito remembers witnessing a fire in his native city of Tokyo that was both terrifying and spectacular. Flames emerged from a window, he says, “like a crazy dragon.”

Overcoming his fear of this deadly and destructive force was part of Saito’s journey towards mastering his craft: using fire to create exquisite beauty through the ancient process of bronze casting. Since 2500 BCE, numerous cultures have made bronze sculpture by pouring a molten mixture of tin and copper (and sometimes other metals as well) into a mold. Time-consuming, labor-intensive and difficult to master, bronze casting is widely associated with monumentality—immense public works of art that frequently include representations of the human body, from Rodin’s Thinker to equestrian statues of Confederate generals. Casting is also a way to create numerous copies of a single sculpture (for example, there are several dozen Thinkers, in museums all over the world).

Saito’s explorations of this material represent an approach and a sensibility that are almost diametrically opposed to these notions of bronze’s role and function. For more than thirty years, he has investigated the medium as a way of describing nature, rather than making monuments to culture. His way of making art—what he has described as “earthly sculptural poetry--” comes out of the Japanese belief in nature as a friendly spiritual guide for human actions, rather than the widely-held Western view of the world as a set of resources to be plundered, or even as a sublime backdrop for human achievement.

Each of Saito’s sculptures is unique, having been created through the time-honored Italian method in which the original sculpture, or, in Saito’s case, a bit of nature— a twig, a pine cone, a banana peel-- is covered with a mixture of plaster and sand (‘invested’) and then burned or melted out of that mold. The resulting cavity is then filled with molten metal. Later, the plaster/sand shell is broken away from the metal.

Since both the original object and the mold are destroyed in this process, there can only be one cast, rather than the edition of multiple copies usually associated with bronze—just as, Saito points out, each living thing is unique. In millionyearseeds, he asserts his affinity for the natural world: both an appreciation of it and a desire to live in harmony with it. Over a period of months and years, he has transformed some two thousand fragments of organic detritus into perfect bronze replicas: banana peels, pine cones, nut shells, pods, peppers, mushrooms, twigs and plant roots. His installations of these tiny sculptures across the walls of the gallery suggest impossibly distant galaxies of dark stars, or flocks of circling birds, moving through the air. The net-like, fanned form of woven bronze ‘twigs’ that opens the exhibition seems to release its objects like schools of fish, circling through water.

Saito's cloud-like configurations of dozens or even hundreds of elements also suggest growth or movement-- almost as if the pieces themselves might continue multiplying when we aren't looking, or shift *en masse* across the wall like a living thing. The sense we have that, despite their individual uniqueness, they are all connected to each other, is a reminder of the interdependence of all living things. In the forest, each pine cone contains many seeds, each with the potential to become a giant tree-- releasing thousands of additional cones throughout the decades or even centuries of its lifetime. But the conditions must be right for the seeds to grow.

The Japanese practice of folding a thousand paper cranes is, at its core, an expression of deep compassion for others. In 2011, while Saito was creating his first wall installation of bronze pinecones, an earthquake triggered-tsunami swept over the east coast of Japan, destroying many cities and towns and taking some 28,000 lives. For Saito, the process of making the sculpture became a representation of a form of prayer. In its present form, it is also an invocation of time: both the many hours the making of each bronze pine cone represents, and the years that it takes for each pine cone on the forest to achieve its potential.

II. Bright moments

Almost all bronze sculpture is produced at commercial foundries. The artist is only indirectly involved-- a supervisor, neither casting nor finishing their own work. Saito erases this distance between artist and material by undertaking the entire process in his own studio, experiencing the craft of it daily with the intimacy of a painter or potter—handling the materials, engaging in the endless labor involved in casting, cleaning, and finishing each piece.

Saito's deeply personal sculptural practice has also been shaped by a lifelong affinity for music. Series of works in recent years have reflected his affection for the compositions of avant-gardist Erik Satie, as well as for those of jazz master Thelonius Monk. Saito's installation of a gleaming, golden pile of several lengths and weights of cast-bronze bamboo pays homage to Monk's crisp piano syncopation even as their intertwined arrangement, aided by gravity itself, suggests multiple instrumental voices. Their hand-ground golden surfaces offer a startling contrast to the dark, organic-looking browns and blacks of the swarms of sculptures on the surrounding walls. Yet the leaning bamboo sticks are still texturally rich, like a raw material freshly-dug from the ground.

III. Butterfly, flutter by

One day in 2014, Saito encountered a crippled butterfly on his property. Drawn to it, as he is to all the beautiful, insignificant creations of nature, he cared for it for the short time that it had left. Later, he imagined an animated butterfly that could live forever, its wings moving slowly in a meditative, gentle rise and fall. Though materially different from his bronze sculptures, Saito's animation embodies the same kind of intense focus on the small and insignificant wonders on the natural world, and the patience with which he approaches every aspect of his practice. Like each tiny sculpture, the butterfly's slow, repeated movement elicits reflection on the fleeting nature of our own lives, and how important it is to pay attention to the details.

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